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TAGS: PGOV PREL EG IS RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MFA ON PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

REF: MOSCOW 3026

Classified By: Acting Political M/C David Kostelancik for reasons 1/4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) MFA Counselor for Israel and Palestine Viktor Simakov told us on October 21 that a recent briefing on Israel-Palestinian negotiations by visiting Palestinian Authority officials confirmed doubts within the MFA about the possibility of the two sides reaching a settlement by the end of the year. While the GOR would be pleased to see the Israelis and Palestinians overcome differences in the next few months, it would "not be a tragedy" if an agreement had to wait until 2009.

¶2. (C) Simakov said that Russia supported Egypt circulating its proposal for a national reconciliation government among the Palestinian factions, and looked forward to the Egyptian-mediated talks in Cairo in November. He thought that the fact that the various factions had agreed to participate in the meeting demonstrated the effectiveness of Egyptian diplomacy, but added that the gap between Fatah and Hamas was too great to bridge by a single meeting.

¶3. (C) Simakov feared that PA President Abbas had "made the gap bigger" between the PA and Hamas by rejecting Hamas' claim that his term expires on January 9, 2009, arguing instead that it extends to January 2010. Abbas appeared to hold out the prospect of calling early elections, which could be a point of negotiation in Cairo. Simakov said there was a sense of urgency to reconciling the Palestinians, as the longer this process took the more entrenched Hamas would become in Gaza.

¶4. (C) In response to our question about the GOR's ability to influence Hamas, Simakov said that direct communication between Russia and Hamas was minimal, and that Hamas officials last visited Moscow in 2007. The Russian Embassy in Damascus maintained contacts with Hamas representatives, but, Simakov asserted, Russia's ability to influence Hamas, either to settle its differences with Fatah or Israel, was limited. He added that Syria and Saudi Arabia also found limits to their influence with the Hamas leadership, which was well versed in the "political games" common to the region, such as telling a party what it wanted to hear during a meeting, then doing something else after leaving the room.

¶5. (C) Simakov thought that Olmert's October 6-7 trip to Russia, which included meetings with Medvedev and FM Lavrov, was motivated as much by domestic Israeli politics as by diplomatic and security concerns (reftel). Olmert hoped to demonstrate that he was still the Israeli leader, despite not having participated in the recent Kadima primary. His diplomatic priorities were to reiterate Israel's concerns with the Iranian nuclear program and Russian military cooperation with Iran and Syria. Simakov said that on the last issue, Medvedev stated very clearly that Olmert could "sleep well" knowing that Russia would not do anything that would threaten Israeli security.

BEYRLE